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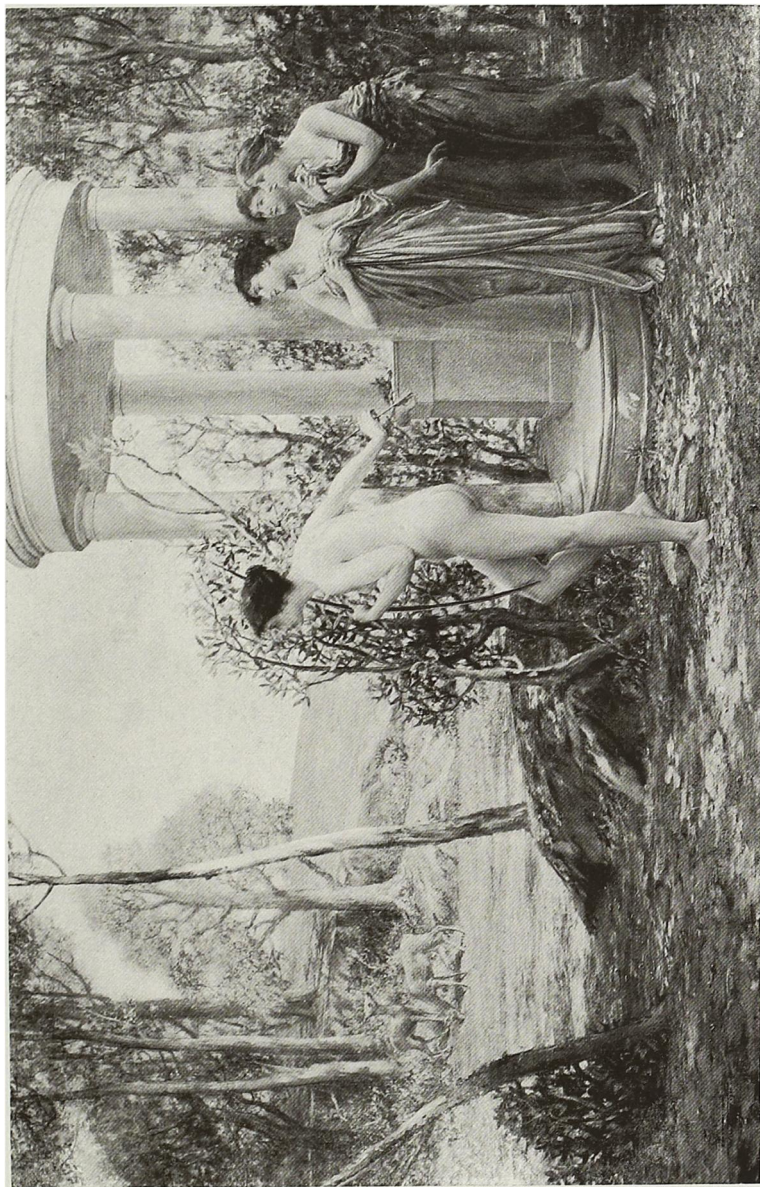
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THE ELYSIAN LAWN
By Will H. Low



BRUSH AND PENCIL

VOL. XI

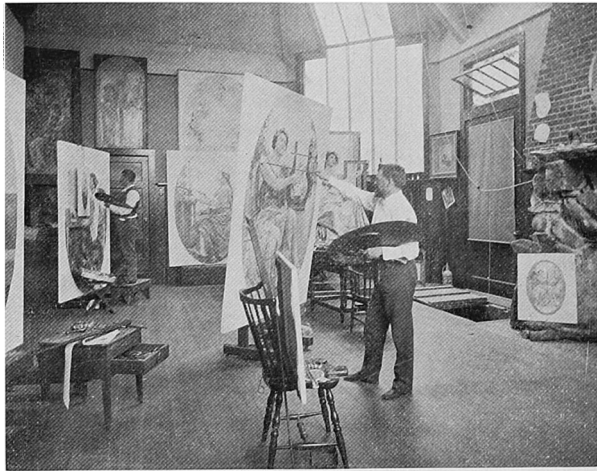
DECEMBER, 1902

No. 3

MURAL PAINTING—MODERN POSSIBILITIES OF AN ANCIENT ART *

In the year 1298 the citizens of a town in Italy decided to rebuild their cathedral. The town was Florence, and the noble pile which we know as Santa Maria del Fiore—St. Mary of the Flowers—arose through a decree issued by the governing body of the city, corresponding to our municipal councils, that briefly ranlikethis:

"Since the highest mark of prudence in a people of noble origin is to proceed in the management of their affairs so that their magnanimity and wisdom may be evinced in their outward acts,

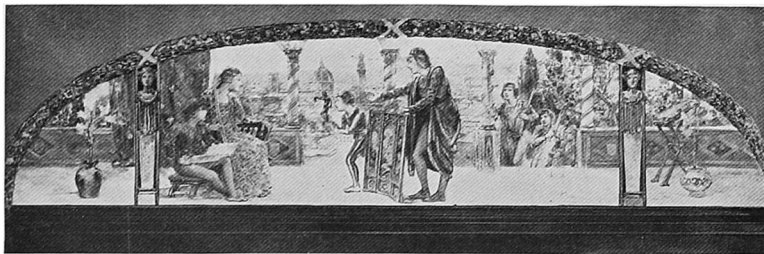


STUDIO OF WILL H. LOW
Lawrence Park, Bronxville

we order Arnolfo, head master of our commune, to make a design for the restoration of our cathedral in a style of magnificence which neither the industry or power of man can surpass, that it may harmonize with the opinion of many wise persons in this city and state, who think that this commune should not engage in any enterprise unless its intention be to make the result correspond with that noblest sort of heart which is composed by the united will of many citizens."

Brave words! Words indicative of noble resolve and civic pride!

* Substance of a lecture delivered by the author in Chicago, with illustrations of his work covering a wide period.



FLORENCE
Sketch for Lunette in New York Residence
By Will H. Low

Yet they were uttered by a band of men devoted to mercantile pursuits, shrewd men of business, who had made their town a center of trade. With the history of that town we are all familiar; a flower town indeed, where the arts which adorn and enrich life blossom like the rose; but through all its golden history we find commerce walking hand in hand with art, and not content with material supremacy, seeking an outward and visible sign of its higher aspirations to intellectual superiority. History repeats itself, and it was only the other day—in 1893, to be precise—that we saw one of our great cities, also a citadel of trade, hang out the banner of beauty upon its ramparts, and throw open its gates to the world at the Columbian Exposition at Chicago.

As an artist, I take it to be significant of our future that this great exposition should have been a triumph of art. Its initial conception foreshadowed no such conclusion. It was evident from the first that these United States, having determined to invite all other countries to a great world's fair, would make a showing of material achievements in the so-called useful arts unparalleled in the world's history. Such



VENICE
Sketch for Lunette in New York Residence
By Will H. Low

was the event, and on every side the student of economic conditions found what he came to seek. Above all, however, the one great and lasting impression which we carried with us from Chicago in 1893 was the impression of beauty. The White City remains in our memory as a joy forever; and whatever interest took us to this, that, or the other building, it was the buildings as a whole—the casket which contained the jewel—which primarily engaged and held our attention.

The nation had arrived at that period of its evolution when its



DOLCE FAR NIENTE
By Will H. Low

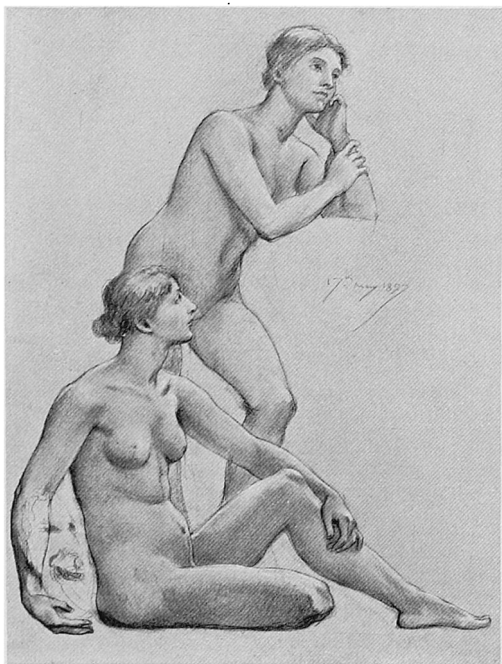
farms and its factories, its thousands of miles of railways and its far-reaching commerce, no longer sufficed. Its schools and its colleges had given birth to a new generation, who demanded more than the shelter and the daily bread which was the reward of their fathers' toil. In this we repeat the history of the world, and it is an inspiring thought to the artist that what may be called man's second impulse, after the first instinct of self-preservation, is toward and for pictorial art.

The cave-dweller had hardly brought down the beasts he hunted before he made pictures of them. The writings of Egypt, Greece, and Europe in the Middle Ages were for the cultured few; the pictures, the "bible of the poor," were for the many, and in this latter

day the wide popularity of our pictorial press emphasizes the same thing. True, it is a far-call from the image of the behemoth scratched on the walls of a cave by primitive man to the mural paintings by Puvis de Chavannes in the public library at Boston, but they both point to the same instinct—to adorn our surroundings, to reproduce that which our eyes have seen, and in its final expression to stimulate our imagination and our aspirations.

It is claiming much for the art of the painter to claim precedence over all other forms expressing man's spiritual aspirations. To the minds of some of my readers literature holds that high place; to others music will assert its rights. Literature in fact, if we accept its oral tradition, as in the time of Homer, is at least a sister to pictorial art, and song is but a step beyond. But literature, as we know it to-day, is dependent on the capacity to read, and music is a reflective and not a creative art. Hence the arts of painting and sculpture best represent the aspiring quality which lifts man above the beasts of the field and exalts him.

It is of course impossible in an article like this to follow the evolutions of painting step by step, nor is it necessary here to do more than to acknowledge sorrowfully that from the point of view of the artist, be he ever so little thoughtful, it is evident that his profession has fallen from the high estate to which it could once lay claim, and that among the avocations of man there are many which are considered more important to modern social conditions than his. To reconquer this lost prestige, to become an integral part of his country's life, to make visual its



THE DANCE—APOLLO AND THE MUSES
Study for Lunette in Waldorf-Astoria
By Will H. Low

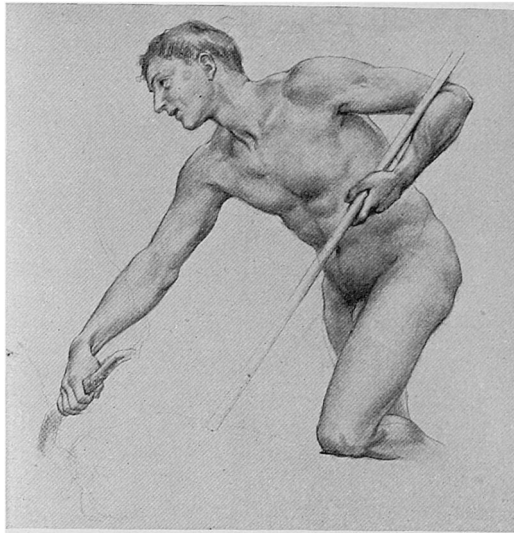
glories, to elevate its spirit, is not only a noble ambition, but one which is quite possible under the conditions at present obtaining.

For the signs of these early days of the twentieth century are not to be mistaken. The current of art, which has been diverted into many channels, and proportionately weakened, since the time of the decadent painters of the seventeenth century gathers volume.

Repeating history, it takes its course through the countries where great enterprises which whet and sharpen the intellect of man prevail, and that this country is to be the scene of a splendid renaissance of art is hardly to be doubted.

Architecture, "mother of arts," has already felt its impulse, and more than a generation has passed since Richard Morris Hunt, our first trained architect, returned from his studies in Paris to supplant the builder who, with a few text-books to copy from, had sufficed for our wants up to that time. Hunt's pupils, and others who like Richardson had sought knowledge in the Old World, continued this pioneer work; schools of architecture were formed, and when the necessity arose of carrying out a great comprehensive scheme of architecture for the Columbian Exposition, our men were capable and ready. Painting and sculpture up to that time, however, had experienced no such general impulse.

A building of some kind, for shelter at least, is a primal necessity, and beauty of proportion and a certain degree of architectural adornment had been insensibly engrafted upon this useful shelter. The step from a carved molding due to an ordinary workman, to sculptured figures, the work of an artist, was more difficult, but under the fostering care of the architect it had been made in rare cases. Thanks to Richardson, La Farge had decorated Trinity Church in Boston as early as 1876, while William M. Hunt's decorations in the assembly



THE MUSE OF WAR
Study for Lunette in Waldorf-Astoria
By Will H. Low

chamber of the New York state capitol, now unfortunately destroyed, came two years after. These were isolated cases, however, and painting as such remained a matter of luxury. The time was not yet ripe.



RUSSIA—THE BELLS
Panel for Waldorf-Astoria—H. J. Hardenbergh, Architect
By Will H. Low

Our older men and the younger painters, who about 1877 returned from study abroad, were mostly painting easel-pictures, selecting such subjects as appealed to them or that they considered likely to appeal to some individual taste. This is not in itself a high purpose, and if you consider the subject a moment, I think you will see why the detached easel-picture can seldom reach the heights which are attained by mural decoration.

The mural decoration is made for and conforms to the place and to the light where it is best seen; it helps and is helped by the lines of its architectural surrounding; it is to last presumably as long as the building where it is placed, and its subject therefore cannot be

trivial or ephemeral. It is on a scale fitted to its surroundings, and generally far enough removed from the eye to preclude petty details obtruding themselves to the detriment of the larger, nobler aspect of the whole. These are but few of the qualities inherent in a successful

mural decoration, and they may be and are violated at will in the detached picture born of a passing fancy on the part of the artist, or suggested by a prevailing level of taste on the part of the purchasing, determining public.

This to many who love and treasure pictures which they may possess, and above all to many of my confrères may seem an iconoclastic declaration, but I make it in all seriousness, not forgetting the many splendid pictures which, painted in one light and seen in another, taken as are some of the Rembrandts which grace our galleries from dimly lit rooms in Holland to be subjected to electric light, still retain power to charm and to elevate. The growth of the easel-picture, however, is one comparatively modern, and with the conditions which it is not optimistic to believe will soon prevail, the ancient practice of painting pictures for special places provided by the architect may soon direct painting

to its original uses, and restore to it something of its pristine glory.

For mural painting is simply this—a picture painted for a special place; and if it be the painting of an exhumed wineshop in Pompeii or Michael Angelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, its object is one



ITALY—THE 'CELLO

Panel for Waldorf-Astoria—H. J. Hardenbergh, Architect

By Will H. Low



THE DANCE—APOLLO AND THE MUSES

Panel for Waldorf-Astoria—H. J. Hardenbergh, Architect

By Will H. Low

and the same. Hence, it is by no means necessary that the mural painter should be given vast spaces to cover. The most modest of our homes may be decorated as were the houses of Pompeii, the simplest village church can engage anew the painter as the primitive masters of Italy were engaged, no town need be too small to have its town hall or its school-house become an object-lesson in beauty, carrying in its turn some lesson in civic virtue.

Do you wish a portrait, for instance? Why should you not take a panel above the mantel, and there above your hearthstone set in the portrait you desire. Consult the artist; ask him to suit his work to the place in color, in light, and in composition, and of your local portrait-painter you will have made a mural painter. Take the wall spaces above your doors or a long panel between windows where no picture will hang, and cause it to be filled with a decorative composition (by which term I would by no means exclude landscape), and you will produce the charming scheme of decoration which characterized the time of Louis XV. More than this, objects of common household use can be enriched and make the eye glad by the painter's art, as were the buffets and cabinets and even the cradles of old Italy.

The wish to emphasize the fact that in our common desire to possess pictures we can make them things of daily use as well as beauty by their incorporation with our houses, making our homes more beautiful and more individual, has led me astray from the brief historical review of our decorative achievements which took root for

the first time at the Columbian Exposition. When these beautiful buildings were designed, and the architectural and engineering problems they presented were solved, the question of their embellishment presented itself. Our sculptors, who until then had found their chief employment in portrait statues, were found to have kept pure through their comparatively prosaic production their poetry of conception.

It is unnecessary to enumerate here the happy commingling of beauty and use which the sculptors of the exposition presented. We were made to respect our country more through its noble representation by Daniel French, we were made more hopeful of its future by Frederick Macmonnies' joyous fountain. When it came to the turn of the painters, the men who had served longer than Jacob served for Rachel, a hard apprenticeship of designing illustrations, of teaching in schools of art, and of painting pot-boiling pictures were likewise found to have kept alive the flame of desire for nobler occupation.

Great wall spaces were provided for them, and making up in enthusiasm what they may have lacked in practical experience, they set to work. The summer of 1892 will remain memorable in the annals of our national art. In attempting to bring my subject nearer to my readers, I may be permitted to be somewhat personal. I can better describe the occurrences of that memorable year by simply telling you what I saw and heard of it.

In the winter and spring preceding this time it was rumored among the artists of New York that the time so long desired by a small



MUSIC OF THE SEA

Panel for Waldorf-Astoria—H. J. Hardenbergh, Architect

By Will H. Low

nucleus of painters interested in decoration was near at hand. The first step was the selection of a competent director of decoration, resulting in the happy choice of Francis D. Millet. About this same time the reward of many years' waiting came to me in the shape of a commission for a decorative ceiling in the then projected Waldorf Hotel.

Hence, when in common with eight or ten others I was asked by Mr. Millet to undertake one of the domes in the Liberal Arts Building, I found myself to my still unceasing regret compelled to refuse.

The dimensions of the Waldorf ceiling are so great that at that time no studio could be found large enough to do it in on this side of the water, and I was forced to carry my work to Paris. It was from a distance then that I heard of the earnest band of workers at Chicago. The artists intrusted with the work assembled here early in the summer of 1892. Their designs for the most part were to be executed directly on the wall surfaces of the building, and were to share their fate of existing only for the time of the exposition. The temporary character of the decoration, however, entailed no lack of care in their execution. Each artist, as in honor bound, approached his task as though his work were for all time. Renewing the traditions of the great artists of the past, they made common cause with the one object in view of glorifying their country by their individual effort.

In the midst of the still unfinished buildings and the chaos of the partially completed park in which they stood, they worked with courage through the day, meeting together at night in one of the mushroom buildings which had grown around the exposition. The nights were thus made helpful in the effusion of comrades bound together by a common devotion to art. In far-off Paris I heard of this, and felt, surrounded as I was by all that is beautiful in that great capital of art, that in my own country, in her inland metropolis, there was a new growth, a new hope, significant of a future which from this modest beginning might surpass all that the world has seen.

In fact, to this fellowship of work through the day to the evenings spent in consultation may be traced the very considerable growth of decorative art which in a few short years has accomplished so much—much more than I can hope to describe here. Suffice it to say that one of the most hopeful features of it all is the general character of its manifestation. The desire to enrich and to decorate buildings is not confined to any one section of the country nor to any one class of building. Bowdoin College in far-off Maine, through the generosity of a well-wisher, has four great mural paintings decorating its art gallery; the Boston Public Library has paintings by Abbey, Sargent, and Puvis de Chavannes; a bank in busy Pittsburg has two large lunettes by Blashfield and Millet; the criminal and appellate courts and different banks and hotels in Chicago, New York, and Boston have enlisted the services of our painters; private residences

too numerous to mention of various pretensions have added to the artistic store; and greatest of all, the Congressional Library at Washington has become a treasure-house of the mural painters' art.

This is the growth of ten years, and counts but as a beginning. In this growth and in its partial realization it has been my privilege to participate in some degree, and I believe that I may convey to you a fuller comprehension of the work of a mural painter in theory and in practice by selecting an executed work of my own, and describing its growth from an incipient thought to a completed work, spreading more than a thousand square feet of pictured surface upon the walls of the great ball-room of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York.

The first consideration which presents itself to a mural painter is that of the character of the room which he is asked to decorate. In this case the room, while known as the ball-room, was equally intended to be used for entertainments in which music was to be the chief feature. Hence, the general theme of music was suggested. Theatrical entertainments being also given there, the drama demanded recognition. Lastly, as the room was in a hotel in a peculiarly cosmopolitan city, likely to open its doors to guests from all nations, some direct allusion to those presumptive guests seemed in place.

The spaces allotted to me were twenty in number. Fourteen of these were oval spaces in the cove of the room, and six were semi-circular panels, two of which were at one end of the room and four at the other. The oval spaces were seven feet in height by five in width, and the nearest point to the spectator was twenty-eight feet from the floor. This distance necessitated the use of figures considerably over life size.

In the fourteen ovals, therefore, I placed as many figures of women, each typical of a country, with a typical musical instrument of that country. As the subdivisions of the world are more than fourteen in number, it was necessary to make a choice, and I own I was largely governed in this by the possible future patrons of the hotel. Another difficulty presented itself in the choice of musical instruments. Our own country, for instance, can hardly be said to have a national musical instrument, unless it be the banjo, and that in some way would have seemed to necessitate the portrayal of a colored woman. This difficulty I overcame by making America typical of vocal music. Russia again presented the same lack of a recognizable typical instrument of music. Disdaining the wicked suggestion of a friend that Russia could play on a samovar, I depicted her with a string of sleigh-bells.

The lunettes, as the semicircular panels are called, which were twelve feet long, afforded me opportunity for compositions with a number of figures. Between the two principal lunettes I distributed those patron saints of the arts, the Muses. In one, Terpsichore dances in the center to the music of a lyre played by Apollo. In the other,



STAINED-GLASS WINDOW
By Will H. Low

Melpomene declaims, while Homer, resting on his lyre, listens. The others of the nine sisters are grouped about in guise of audience. I sought by the introduction of Apollo in the one panel to suggest the mythological side of art; and by Homer in the other, its more human interests.

The other four lunettes were respectively the music of the sea, mermaidens blowing through trumpet-shaped shells to the accompaniment of the waves; the music of the woods, Echo vainly leading on two wondering mortals; the music of peace, which was pastoral in character; and the music of war. All these might be thought to run the gamut of the emotions inspired by music.

Such was my conception of the task before me. Now a word as to the means of execution.

As in all enterprises of like kind here in this country, there was need of haste. The accumulation of interest on an investment in a building of this magnitude before it can be operated and earning money is a serious matter. On the first day of May, therefore, the artists engaged for the decoration were told that their work must be in place on November 1st. My portion of this work amounted to one thousand and ninety feet of canvas to cover. The three other artists, Messrs. Blashfield, Simons, and Turner, had less space to cover, though Mr. Blashfield's ceiling for the same room in which my panels are placed presented great mechanical difficulties. It may be imagined, however, that all four of these men led a strenuous life throughout a busy summer. In my own case, a calculation made since it is all over shows that I was forced to complete one of my panels every eleventh day.

Of course I was obliged to seek assistance, and in this I was fortunate in finding two of my friends, both men of very different temperament from my own, chosen for that peculiarity in order to counteract by friendly opposition excesses in conception or treatment into which my own adventurous spirit might lead me.

For not the least danger which work executed in such haste is liable to lead one to, is the desire to achieve too much in the time allotted. Here my two assistants in kindly spirit often pointed out the mechanical impossibility of carrying out in the given period all that my



HOMAGE TO WOMAN

Ceiling in Waldorf-Astoria—H. J. Hardenbergh, Architect

By Will H. Low

too great enthusiasm might have led me to attempt, and this limitation proved to be of value. My debt to these men is therefore all the greater, for to them fell the task of executing work which in character—design, color, everything—should be essentially my own.

To this end I painted small, carefully finished studies of each of

my compositions; these were then photographed to make lantern slides. As these studies are in the same proportion as the larger



AURORA
In Metropolitan Museum, New York
By Will H. Low

spaces to be filled, these lantern slides, by means of the stereopticon, were thrown on the large canvas. This we did evenings and in the dark. We would go over the outlines on the large canvas with pen-

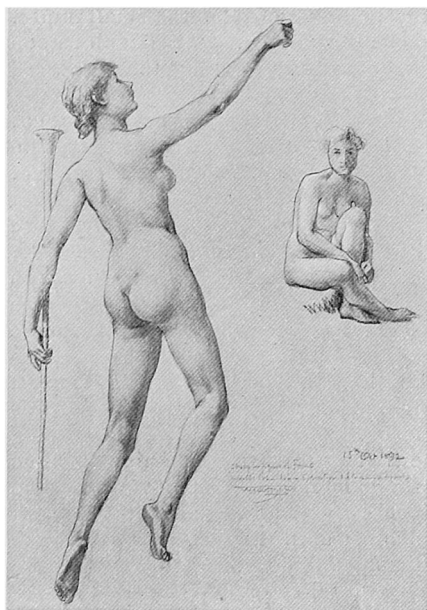
cils, thus securing a perfectly drawn enlargement of the small study. Then the small study would be copied by my assistants in color upon these outlines, and each of my larger canvases would be thus prepared for my final retouching.

In this way a surprising amount of work may be accomplished, and as it is simply an enlarged copy of the small study, the artist who is responsible for the final result finds his work half done. My studio, which is in the country, a short distance from New York, was built expressly for decorative work, and one of its conveniences is a large opening in the floor about eighteen inches wide, running about thirty feet, the full length of the studio. Above this I hang my canvas on pulleys, which enables me to drop it through the floor in order to work on the upper portion of the picture, and allows me to dispense with ladders and scaffolding.

You may have noticed that I speak of doing all my work on canvas. The modern decorative painter differs from the earlier members of this craft who worked in fresco. Fresco, from the Latin word meaning fresh, was literally painting on newly laid plaster. The pigment used was a form of water-color, and the painter had each day the ground of the portion of the picture which he wished to paint freshly laid, the next day proceeding in like manner until the picture was finished. To-day we think that for our climate and for the houses which we build, it is safer to paint on canvas with oil-color. When the painting is finished, the space which it is to cover on the wall is smeared with white lead, of the consistency of paste. The back of the canvas is covered with the same material, and it is then pressed on the wall. The white lead drying causes perfect adhesion, and the canvas becomes an integral portion of the wall.

I have described at some length the choice of subjects. Even more important from the painter's point of view are the questions of the arrangement of figures to harmonize with the surrounding architectural lines, of the color to harmonize with the general coloration of the room, and the scale of the figures, so that they may not appear too large or too small for the place they occupy. The qualities which insure this harmony are those which determine the rank of the decorator. No hard-and-fast rule can be made, and no amount of study will replace the intuitive faculty in this regard. The artist must work with a mental vision of the completed work before him, and must be able in his studio to judge of the future effect of his work when seen in place.

The greatest decorator of modern times, Puvis de Chavannes, once told me that it was his habit to sit in the building where his decoration was to be, in front of the space which it was to fill, until, as he expressed it, he "saw" it on the wall. "Then," said he, "I can return to my studio, and it is surprising how little the completed picture differs from the mental vision which I first saw in place."



STUDY FOR FIGURE OF FAME
World's Columbian Exposition Diploma of Awards
By Will H. Low

This is undoubtedly the only way to secure the best results, and it is evident that it demands that the decorator should be a man of concentrated imaginative force. He who is only sure of what he does after it is visible to others had better leave decoration alone. This is especially true in this country, where our proverbial haste will not wait for the completion of a building before commencing to decorate it. Most of the mural painter's work must, therefore, be conceived with no other aid than that of the architect's drawings. From the puzzling lines of such a design his mental vision must, so to speak, construct the room; from the explanation of an electrician he must judge how his future work will be lighted at

night; he must be able to weigh carefully the effect of moldings and wall hangings, which only exist on paper. But if he can do all these things, and can in addition infuse thought and inspiration into his work, the building which contains it is fortunate indeed.

To all those who enter there the color smiles from the wall, the theme develops where empty wall space would otherwise exist, and according to the power of the artist to give or that of the spectator to receive, the tranquil vision may convey the sense of beauty, strength, or wisdom. Darwin, in his old age, deplored the fact that too close concentration in scientific research had destroyed in him the power of imagination. He gravely asserts in his autobiography that if he had his life to live over, he would give an hour every day to reading poetry or imaginative fiction. A true scientist's remedy!

But we as a people are much in the same straits. In our workaday world, in the battle of material interests we are in danger of becoming mere human machines. To turn from grave concerns of every-day life to nurse deliberately our imaginative faculty is impossible. But to surround ourselves with paintings which stimulate

thought, to read history, or prophecy on a wall, almost unconsciously, needs only the united will of many citizens. If we have the public spirit which the citizens of old Florence evinced six centuries ago we can do this. In the marts of commerce, in the halls of legislative deliberation, in the courts of justice, and in our libraries and schools await many fair wall spaces. Give these to the mural painter, and you will do two things: you will bring into your daily life a message of spiritual aspiration which he who runs may read, and you will help to create that great civilizing force which every truly great nation has had, and which we as yet lack, a national school of art.

WILL H. LOW.



WINTER—CARTOON FOR WINDOW

By Will H. Low